

Virachey National Park Now Open to Rubber, Agribusiness

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After opening the bulk of Virachey National Park to mineral exploration in 2006, the government last month granted economic land concessions there totaling nearly 190 square km to grow rubber and other crops.

The concessionaire, the casino and mining operator Try Pheap, is currently involved in a Pursat province land dispute where villagers say a special economic zone under development on the Thai border threatens nearly 1,000 hectares of farmland.

According to Council of Ministers records, Prime Minister Hun Sen on Feb 1 granted Mr Pheap

two 70-year leases covering 18,855 hectares in Taveng district within the national park in Ratanakkiri province's remote northeast.

The 333,000-hectare Asean Heritage-listed national park is considered a key regional conservation area, containing a crucial watershed supporting the Mekong river, semi-evergreen and deciduous forest, as well as habitats for globally threatened primate and feline species.

According to human rights and environmental monitors, land concessions have been used as a means to circumvent a 2002 moratorium on commercial logging.

Officials at the Environment Ministry were unavailable yesterday,

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but provincial governor Pao Ham Phan said the conceded areas comprised "degraded forest" and bamboo groves.

"It will not affect the trees, but it will conserve them. Now there are no roads at all, meaning that no one can take care of the forest," said Mr Ham Phan, adding that an environmental impact assessment was expected.

With scant details available, it was unclear yesterday whether development plans complied with conservation laws, or with a management plan developed for the

park as the result of an eight-year, \$5 million World Bank program to develop its oversight that concluded in 2008.

A final project review by the Bank found that year that its achievements were at "significant" risk as funding and government oversight could lapse after it ended.

The government revealed in 2007 that it had also granted exploratory mining rights to the Australian company Indochine Resources, now known as Indochine Mining, on 60 percent of the park, without informing the Environment Ministry or the World Bank.

For conservationists, this called into question the government's

commitment to conservation and jeopardized future funding, according to the Bank review.

Environmental campaigners Global Witness identify Mr Pheap, the concessionaire, as a business partner of Lao Meng Khin, a principal investor in the broad-based evictions and development at Phnom Penh's Boeng Kak lake, as well as the sprawling 316,000-hectare land concession that has also given rise to land disputes in Pursat.

Keo Chanthan, a representative of Try Pheap Import Export, said yesterday that the company planned to bulldoze 100 km to construct a road leading from Taveng to Andong Meas district.

"When there is a road, we can prevent illegal logging," he said. "As far as I know, most parts are degraded forest and there are not many commercially valuable trees left.

"We will keep the high mountains intact, and in bare areas we will plant rubber trees," he said, adding that royalties would be paid to the government for any valuable trees felled during the clearances.

Eleven men, seven of whom remain at large, were convicted in 2006 for their roles in a large-scale illegal logging operation in Virachey National Park that was uncovered in 2004 by government and World Bank officials.